

# Frank L. Owsley and the Defense of Southern Identity

By EDWARD S. SHAPIRO

Of all the sections of the United States, none has attracted as much attention, criticism, analysis, and notoriety as the South.<sup>1</sup> A small library has been written defending the proposition that the people living below the Potomac and Ohio Rivers are a single entity bearing the ineradicable imprint of "southernness". Included are such representative and often seemingly contradictory titles as *The South as a Conscious Minority*, *The South and the Sectional Image*, *The South and the Nation*, and *The Southerner and World Affairs*; *The Southern Heritage* and *Southern Legacy*; *The Making of a Southerner*, *The South and the Southerner*, *The Southerner as American*, and *Southerners and Other Americans: The Militant South* and *The Uncertain South*; *The Lasting South*, *Seeds of Southern Change*, *This Changing South*, and *The South in Continuity and Change*; *The Old South* and *The New South*; *The Romantic South*, *Romanticism and Nationalism in the Old South*, and *Romance and Realism in Southern Politics*; *The Emerging South* and *The Advancing South*; *The Everlasting South* and *An Epitaph for Dixie*; *The Lazy South* and *Southern Tradition and Regional Progress*; *The Burden of Southern History* and *The Myth of Southern History*; *A Southerner Discovers the South* and *A Southerner Discovers New England*; *The Idea of the South*, *The Mind of the South*, *The Southern Temper* and *The Southern Mystique*; *Southern Exposure* and *Look Away From Dixie*; and, of course, *The Great South*. Perhaps the greatest scholarly tribute to the idea of southern distinctiveness is the ten-volume history of the South published by the Louisiana State University press.

For decades now the South has been an exotic, and for some an obscene, curiosity piece, an object both of popular interest and scholarly investigation. The popularity of the movies "Birth of a Nation", "I Was a Fugitive From a Chain Gang", and "Gone With the Wind" attest to the hold which the theme of southern unique-

<sup>1</sup> A different version of this paper was given at the eighth annual Bloomsburg State College (Pa.) History Conference, May, 1975.

ness has had over the American popular imagination. Scholars and polemicists such as Frank Tannenbaum, John Dollard, Arthur Raper, Robert Coles, and H. L. Mencken have studied the mysteries and afflictions of the South, often with a mordant fascination, seeking to discover the means whereby the South could take her rightful place within the mainstream of national life. No other section has ever been referred to as a problem, much less the country's number one economic problem, as the South was by Franklin D. Roosevelt in the 1930's, and no other section has ever been advised to put on shoes as was suggested by President Roosevelt's Secretary of Labor Frances Perkins.<sup>2</sup>

Despite this abundance of concern with the South, there is still no agreement regarding the factors responsible for the South's supposed distinctiveness. By now the reality of the South has been covered with so many layers of folklore and mythology that it has become difficult, if not impossible, to separate reality from fiction, truth from myth. In 1961 David M. Potter could write an article appropriately entitled "The Enigma of the South" in which he argued that the South has become "a kind of Sphinx on the American land." And Paul Gaston could declare in his book *The New South Creed: A Study in Southern Mythmaking* that the South is distinguished from other parts of the United States by the extent to which "myths have been spawned . . . and have asserted their hegemony over the Southern mind." The quest for "The Central Theme of Southern History" thus remains as valid today as in 1928 when Ulrich B. Phillips published his famous essay of that title. Closely related to the quest for the central theme is the question of which individual or group most fully embodies and reflects the distinctive characteristics of the South. *Who Speaks for the South?* James McBride Dabbs asked in 1964. Is it Senator Claghorn or Jeeter Lester, Billy Graham or Rhett Butler, Tallulah Bankhead or George Wallace, Uncle Remus or Bear Bryant?<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Edward S. Shapiro, "The Southern Agrarians, H. L. Mencken, and the Quest for Southern Identity," in *American Studies*, XIII (Fall, 1972), 75-92; George B. Tindall, "The Benighted South: Origins of a Modern Image," in *Virginia Quarterly Review*, XL (Spring, 1964), 281-94.

<sup>3</sup> David M. Potter, "The Enigma of the South," *Yale Review*, LI (October, 1961), 142; Paul Gaston, *The New South Creed: A Study in Southern Mythmaking* (New York, 1970), 8; Tindall, "Mythology: A New Frontier in Southern History," in *Myth and Southern History*, edited by Patrick Gerster and Nicholas Cords (Chicago, 1974), 1-15; Monroe L. Billington (ed.), *The South, a Central Theme?* (New York, 1969). George E. Mowry has noted that no regional journal is as influential as the *Journal of Southern History*, and no parochial topic has

For Phillips "the cardinal test of a Southerner and the central theme of Southern history" was the indomitable resolve of southern whites that the South "shall be and remain a white man's country." Two years after the appearance of Phillips' article the twelve Southern Agrarians brought out their manifesto *I'll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition*, the most militant defense of the idea of southern distinctiveness since that of George Fitzhugh. The Agrarians believed the difference between the southern way of life and the American way of life was the difference between agrarianism and industrialism, and they called upon those Southerners "who are being converted frequently to the industrial gospel" to repent and return "to the support of the Southern tradition." Since the publication of *I'll Take My Stand* historians have continued to probe for the source of southern uniqueness, and the region's distinctiveness has been variously attributed to its romanticism, its conservatism, its tendency to mythologize, its lack of commitment to an ethic of social responsibility, its heightened historical consciousness, its militarism and violence, its sexual license, its folk culture, its sultry climate, and its heritage of frustration, failure, and defeat. "In the history of Southern history in America," David L. Smiley has remarked, "the central theme has been the quest for the central theme."<sup>4</sup>

Despite their disagreements as to the sources of southern distinctiveness, most historians have argued that they are to be found in certain unique characteristics of the southern society, economy, or politics, and that the South's defense of its regional differences ineluctably emerged from these peculiarities. Unfortunately no single interpretation, or combination of interpretations, can explain over one hundred and fifty years of history of a region with a population of great social, racial, economic, and geographical diversity stretching from Virginia to Texas. An alternative approach would be to look to the realm of ideas, for, as Professor Smiley has argued, the South "exists only as a controlling idea or belief upon

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been covered in such depth as the South has been in the ten-volume history of the South published by the Louisiana State University Press, Mowry, *Another Look at the Twentieth Century South* (Baton Rouge, 1973), 3-4.

<sup>4</sup> Ulrich B. Phillips, "The Central Theme of Southern History," in *American Historical Review*, XXXIV (October, 1928), 31; Twelve Southerners, "Introduction: A Statement of Principles," in *I'll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition* (New York, 1930, 1962), xix-xx; David L. Smiley, "The Quest for the Central Theme in Southern History," in *South Atlantic Quarterly*, LXXI (Summer, 1972), 307-25.

which men acted, risked, and died. . . . Those of whatever persuasion or tradition who believed themselves to be Southern are indeed Southern." Of particular importance in defining southern identity are the ideas Southerners have had of the North and their perceptions of northern attitudes toward the South. The North and South have used each other, C. Vann Woodward has written, "not only to define their identity and to say what they are *not*, but to escape in fantasy from what they *are*." There is need, Vann Woodward continues, "for a history of North-South images and stereotypes, of when and how and why they were developed, the shape they took, the uses that have been made of them and how they have been employed from time to time in regional defense, self-flattery, and polemics. . . . All along they have been prolific breeders of regional myth, and their fertility is not yet exhausted." By refocusing the search for the central theme from the southern economy and social structure onto the various defenses which Southerners developed in response to northern attacks, the question of southern identity loses much of its provincial character and becomes a chapter in the history of the relationship between the North and the South. The central theme of southern history thereby becomes part of American national history.<sup>6</sup>

The southern historian Frank L. Owsley is proof against all-encompassing, monocausal interpretations of southern identity. For Owsley the South was a section perennially under seige, but his perception of what was being attacked and what should be defended changed. Owsley was typical of many Southerners whose defense of the southern way of life was shaped more by their visions of northern designs on the South than by any immutable traits of southern society.

Owsley was born in the black belt of Alabama in 1890 and spent much of his childhood on a farm. He received both his B.A. and M.A. degrees from Alabama Polytechnic Institute and then went on for doctoral work at the University of Chicago where he studied under William E. Dodd. Owsley was in graduate school at a time when American historiography was in revolt against the assumptions of the "nationalist" historians of the late Nineteenth Century. John W. Burgess, Hermann Von Holst, and James Ford Rhodes,

<sup>6</sup> Smiley, "Quest for the Central Theme," 324-25; C. Vann Woodward, *American Counterpoint: Slavery and Racism in the North-South Dialogue* (Boston, 1971), 6-7; Michael O'Brien, "C. Vann Woodward and the Burden of Southern Liberalism," in *American Historical Review*, LXXVIII (June, 1973), 603-604.

among others, had argued in the decades immediately following the Civil War that the South had been wrong in challenging the national government. Not only had the South been a barrier to the advance of industrialization, but she had also threatened political centralization and national sovereignty. The victory of the North in the Civil War was morally right since it enabled nationalism, industrial progress, and the abolition of slavery to triumph. Any interpretation of American history which, according to Burgess, "does not demonstrate to the South its error will be worthless, simply because it will not be true. . . . The conviction of the South of its error in secession and rebellion is absolutely indispensable to the establishment of national cordiality."<sup>6</sup>

Frederick Jackson Turner and Charles A. Beard lead the progressive attack on the nationalist school of historians. As was true of most of the leading progressive historians, Turner and Beard came from small towns outside the East and they stressed the importance of the West and South in American development. In *The Significance of Sections in American History*, *Rise of the New West 1819-1829*, and *The United States, 1830-1850: The Nation and Its Sections* Turner argued that American history was essentially the history of sections, not the history of a national organism whose center was in Washington, New York, or Boston. For Turner, sections were natural economic groupings continually competing for economic advantage. Beard in *An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution* and *Economic Origins of Jeffersonian Democracy* saw the struggle over the adoption of the constitution and the political battles of the 1790's as a clash between agrarian and mercantile forces organized along geographic lines. According to Beard, the political history of the late Eighteenth Century provided the key to understanding all of American political history, a history whose major theme was the conflict between agrarian and industrial interests. Turner and Beard rejected the nationalist interpretation of the Civil War as a moral struggle between the forces of freedom and slavery. In their eyes the war was a conflict between two sections with differing economies for control of the national government. Another characteristic of progressive historiography was its tough-mindedness. The progressive historians

<sup>6</sup> For Owsley's biography, see *I'll Take My Stand*, 374-75, and Bernarr Cresap, "Frank L. Owsley and *King Cotton Diplomacy*," in *Alabama Review*, XXVI (October, 1973), 238-40.

discounted ideals, and emphasized the hard economic and sectional realities lying behind the politicians' platitudes. Owsley would incorporate in his work both the progressive emphasis on sectionalism and the importance of the hinterland, as well as its stress on the importance of economic interests in explaining political controversies.<sup>7</sup>

Dodd was one of the most vigorous exponents of this new emphasis on sectionalism. Influenced by his own personal background as the son of a small North Carolina farmer, by the Populist ferment at the turn of the century, and especially by Turner, Dodd stressed in his lectures and writings the importance of sectional conflict, particularly that between the industrial Northeast and the agrarian South. Holding rural democracy in high esteem, Dodd believed that industrial America under the aegis of the Republican Party was drifting away from Jeffersonianism and toward a feudalistic plutocracy dominated by the leaders of finance capitalism. For Dodd political and economic democracy were indivisible and he feared that the dispossession of the middle class would be accompanied by a withering away of republican government. As was true of any Southerner born in the late Nineteenth Century, Owsley did not have to be convinced by Dodd of the crucial role of sectionalism in American history. Dodd, in fact, attracted many southern students to the University of Chicago precisely because of his emphasis on sectionalism. Study under Dodd did, however, sharpen Owsley's awareness of its importance. Furthermore, Dodd's Jeffersonianism and the importance he attributed to the small farmer in the antebellum South would later be echoed in Owsley's pioneering work on the plain folk of the old South.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Richard Hofstadter, *The Progressive Historians: Turner, Beard, Parrington* (New York, 1970), 99-103; John Higham with Leonard Krieger and Felix Gilbert, *History* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, 1965), 173-79, 200-201.

<sup>8</sup> For Dodd, see Robert Dallek, *Democrat and Diplomat: The Life of William E. Dodd* (New York, 1968), 60-61, 77-78, and Wendell Holmes Stephenson, *The South Lives in History: Southern Historians and Their Legacy* (Baton Rouge, 1955), ch. ii. For the growing interest in southern history in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, see Stephenson, *The South Lives in History*, ch. i, Owsley frequently acknowledged his debt to Turner, Beard, and Dodd. See, for example, Owsley, "The War of the Sections," in *Virginia Quarterly Review*, X (Autumn, 1934), 635; Owsley, "The American Triangle," in *Virginia Quarterly Review*, XI (Winter, 1935), 113; Owsley, "The Historical Philosophy of Frederick Jackson Turner," in *American Review*, V (Summer, 1935), 368-75. The progressive emphasis on economic rather than moral or ideological factors in history is most prominently reflected in Owsley's work in his volume on Confederate diplomacy, *King Cotton Diplomacy*. Here he argued that England's attitude toward the Civil War was primarily shaped by England's economic stake in the war rather than by

Owsley's first major work, *State Rights in the Confederacy*, published in 1925, reflected the burgeoning interest in sectionalism. Here Owsley argued that "the" major reason for the defeat of the Confederacy was the inability of the Confederate state governments to free themselves from the shibboleths of state rights and their refusal to support Jefferson Davis' government. Had the southern state leaders been more concerned with the interests of their section than with the interests of their individual states, Owsley claimed, it would have been impossible for the North to have won the war. The outbreak of the war itself, Owsley contended elsewhere, resulted from the struggle between the North and the South for national domination.<sup>9</sup>

Owsley's sectionalism, his growing commitment to the South, and his teaching at Vanderbilt University during the 1920's naturally drew him into the orbit of Donald Davidson, John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, and other future Southern Agrarians. He was asked to write an historical analysis for the Agrarians' symposium *I'll Take My Stand*, and his essay "The Irrepressible Conflict" marked him as one of the most eloquent, although at times extreme, defenders of the traditional South. Owsley's major argument was that, contrary to the views of the nationalist historians such as Rhodes and Von Holst, the Civil War was not a struggle between freedom and slavery, nor was slavery a major cause of the war. The war was due instead to the North's recognition that the South was a barrier to the growth of northern industry and business because of her opposition to protective tariffs, subsidies to shipping interests, banking legislation favorable to the North, and federal aid for internal improvements. "The struggle between an agrarian and an industrial civilization," Owsley maintained, "was the irrepressible conflict, the house divided against itself, which must become according to the doctrine of the industrial section all the one or the other. It was the doctrine of intolerance, crusading, standardizing alike in industry and in life. The South had to be crushed out; it was in the way; it impeded the progress of the machine. So Juggernaut drove his car across the South." The industrial North necessarily caused the Civil War, Owsley con-

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anti-slavery sentiment. For an analysis of Owsley's book, see Cresap, "Frank L. Owsley and *King Cotton Diplomacy*," 235-51.

<sup>9</sup> Owsley, *State Rights in the Confederacy* (Chicago, 1925); Owsley, Review of *David Wilmot: Free-Soiler*, by Charles Buxton Going, in *Nashville Tennessean*, November 30, 1924.

tended, since industrialization, by its very nature, is aggressive, exploitative, and imperialistic.<sup>10</sup>

Owsley hoped his essay would achieve two goals. The first was to convince the South "that the things for which it stood were reasonable and sound, that its condemnation at the hands of the North had been contemptible, and that for it, at least, the philosophy of the North is the religion of an alien God." The second goal was to show how the idealistic rhetoric of the anti-slavery movement had been used by the industrial-financial plutocracy of the Northeast for its own purposes.<sup>11</sup>

Owsley frequently returned to these themes during the 1930's and 1940's. Indeed, for Owsley the central theme of southern history was the South's efforts to defend herself against the depredations of northern industrial and financial interests cloaked in the garb of idealism and humanitarianism. Behind all the attacks upon the South, whether it be abolitionism, Reconstruction, the Scopes Trial agitation, or the controversy engendered by the Scottsboro case, Owsley argued, were big business and high finance. Abolitionism, he maintained, had been used to separate the regions of corn and cotton and to keep the East in control of the national government. The abolitionists and their financial supporters, he wrote in 1940, threatened "the existence of the South as seriously as the Nazis threaten the existence of England and . . . their language was so violent, obscene, and insulting that not even Dr. Goebbels in all his flights has seldom equaled and never surpassed it." He accused the Republican Party of having an "uncompromising hostility to Southern interests and attitudes," and claimed that this had continued through the 1930's.<sup>12</sup>

Reconstruction, "the most abominable phase barbarism had assumed since the dawn of civilization", was the political program of northern capitalists determined to reap the benefits of their victory in the war by keeping the South in bondage. Prostrate after the end of hostilities, the South was turned over to "half-savage blacks", "some of whom could still remember the taste of human flesh and the bulk of them hardly three generations removed from cannibalism." The newly freed Negroes were not to blame, however,

<sup>10</sup>Owsley, "The Irrepressible Conflict," in *I'll Take My Stand*, 61-91.

<sup>11</sup>Owsley, "Irrepressible Conflict," 67.

<sup>12</sup>Owsley, Review of *Freedom of Thought in the Old South*, by Clement Eaton, in *Journal of Southern History*, VI (November, 1940), 559; Owsley, "American Triangle," 117; Owsley to James H. Kirkland, January 20, 1936, and Owsley to Leo M. Favrot, March 17, 1936, Owsley Papers (Vanderbilt University).



since they were merely the unwitting tools of Charles Sumner, Benjamin F. Butler, and other "fanatical abstractionists". The southern revolt against the "coldly self-righteous and intolerant" Radical Republicans was lead by the Ku Klux Klan which closely resembled "the underground organization of the countries occupied by the armies of Hitler".<sup>13</sup>

For Owsley the fact that the South was being portrayed in the 1920's and 1930's as a benighted land ruled by the Ku Klux Klan, ranting fundamentalist preachers, prohibitionists, and yokel politicians was proof that the financiers and capitalists of the Northeast had not given up their campaign to destroy the southern spirit and to discredit southern opposition to modern large-scale industrialism. As a native of Alabama, Owsley was particularly angered by the Scottsboro trial of 1931. He perceived behind all the supposedly humanitarian northern agitation in behalf of the Scottsboro defendants a strange alliance of finance-capitalists and communists. Both groups, he avowed, were interested less in aiding the accused Negroes than in humiliating the South since they realized that the South was the last remaining bulwark against the complete triumph of large-scale industrialism. The South, Owsley claimed, even after the experience of the Civil War and Reconstruction remained characterized by the widespread distribution of property, by a commitment to small-scale agriculture and petty capitalism, and by an opposition to political and economic collectivism whether of the plutocratic or communist variety. The South, both ideologically and socially, thus continued to be faithful to the Jeffersonian ideal of a middle-class society of property holders. In the North, by contrast, a powerful financial and industrial plutocracy ruled a rapidly growing, dispossessed factory proletariat. According to Owsley the logic of the type of industrialization found in the Detroit, Pittsburghs, and Chicagos of the North lead ultimately to communism.<sup>14</sup>

It was characteristic of Owsley's thinking that his major contribution to American historiography was his effort to show the Jeffersonian character of the antebellum South. In a series of articles and in his important book *Plain Folk of the Old South*

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<sup>13</sup> Owsley, "Scottsboro, the Third Crusade: The Sequel to Abolition and Reconstruction," in *American Review*, I (June, 1933), 267-68; Owsley, "Irrepressible Conflict," 62; Owsley, Oliver P. Chitwood, and Herman C. Nixon, *A Short History of the American People*, Vol. II (New York, 1948), 10-22, 22-27, 49-59, 101-105.

<sup>14</sup> Owsley, "Scottsboro," 257-58.

Owsley challenged the image of the Old South propagated by Frederick Law Olmsted and others as consisting largely of planter aristocrats, slaves, and poor whites. He conclusively demonstrated that the social structure of the antebellum South rested upon a "massive body of plain folk . . . neither rich nor very poor", who were mostly small and independent farmers. The "Owsley thesis" implicitly denied that the Civil War involved a northern attempt to preserve democracy since the South was undoubtedly far more democratic and egalitarian than the more industrialized North.<sup>15</sup>

Owsley's commitment to the South during the interwar decades increased as he became more aware of the condescending and patronizing attitude of the North toward the South. He was especially disturbed by H. L. Mencken's biting critique of the South's cultural and social failings, and accused the Baltimore scoffer of being a spokesman for the North's bankrupt urban, technological, and industrial civilization. Owsley even proposed the establishment of a secret organization to strengthen agrarianism in the South and to bolster the morale of Southerners in the face of northern attacks on the South. Members of the organization would be required to read *I'll Take My Stand*, Howard K. Beale's *The Critical Year*, Avery Craven's *Edmund Ruffin*, Jesse T. Carpenter's *The South as a Conscious Minority*, and Allen Tate's *Jefferson Davis*. This reading would be supplemented by visits to Confederate cemeteries where graves would be decorated and orations given on the glories of southern life. "I feel that such occasions," Owsley declared, "offer great possibilities to stir the emotions—and that is what we want to stir—along with the imagination." Owsley hoped

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<sup>15</sup> Owsley, *Plain Folk of the Old South* (Baton Rouge, 1949), pages vii, ix, 7; Owsley, "The Pattern of Migration and Settlement on the Southern Frontier," in *Journal of Southern History*, XI (May, 1945), 147-76; Frank L. Owsley and Harriet C. Owsley, "The Economic Basis of Society in the Late Ante-bellum South," in *Journal of Southern History*, VI (February, 1940), 24-45; Owsley and Owsley, "Economic Structure of Rural Tennessee: 1850-1860," in *Journal of Southern History*, VIII (May, 1942), 161-82; Frank L. Owsley, Review of *Origins of Class Struggle in Louisiana: A Social History of White Farmers and Laborers in Louisiana During Slavery and After, 1840-1875*, by Roger W. Shugg, in *Journal of Southern History*, VI (February, 1940), 116-17. For a critique of the Owsley "thesis", see Fabian Linden, "Economic Democracy in the Slave South: An Appraisal of Some Recent Views," in *Journal of Negro History*, XXXI (April, 1946), 140-89. James C. Bonner places Owsley's analysis of the antebellum South within the context of southern historiography in "Plantation and Farm: The Agricultural South," in *Writing Southern History: Essays in Historiography in Honor of Fletcher M. Green*, edited by Arthur S. Link and Rembert W. Patrick (Baton Rouge, 1965), 155-57. Charles Beard thought very highly of Owsley's work on the antebellum South. Beard to Owsley, May 14, 1940, Owsley Papers.

this organization could spread throughout the South, but he warned that it "should be dignified, restrained, but grim in the purpose of renewing the spirit and self respect of the South."<sup>16</sup>

What is surprising about Owsley's political and social thought during the 1930's was the extent to which this traditional Southerner, who distrusted centralized political power, favored radical and even semi-socialistic means to destroy the power of big business and high finance and to encourage a wider distribution of productive property. Owsley believed only drastic measures could cure the ills brought on by the 1929 depression which, he argued, was due to the fact that the United States had become overindustrialized in terms of available world and domestic markets. Owsley contrasted the experience of largely agricultural France during the 1930's with the more desperate straits of England and the United States as proof for his contention that the economies of the major industrial nations had "matured" and further industrialization would bring only more unemployment and misery. Owsley had accepted the doctrine of the matured economy while a graduate student but it wasn't until the 1930's that its full force was brought home to him. The only lasting and viable solution to the social and economic problems facing the country was the restoration of a propertied society in which small business and especially agriculture had a larger role.<sup>17</sup>

A conservative revolution whose goals were to end the dispossession of the middle-class, to increase the number of independent farmers, and to destroy the power of the industrial-financial plutocracy would, according to Owsley, provide a democratic alternative to fascism and communism. Fascism and communism, in his view, accepted modern industrialization and merely wished to

<sup>16</sup> Owsley to John Gould Fletcher, no date, Owsley Papers; John L. Stewart, *The Burden of Time. The Fugitives and Agrarians* (Princeton, 1965), 109-110, 114-15; Rob Roy Purdy (ed.), *Fugitives' Reunion: Conversations at Vanderbilt, May 3-5, 1956* (Nashville, 1959), 204-205. For Owsley's attitude toward Mencken, see the following: Owsley, "The Pillars of Agrarianism," in *American Review*, IV (March, 1935), 529-30; Shapiro, "The Southern Agrarians . . . Quest for Southern Identity," 86-87; Owsley to Robert Penn Warren, January 12, 1935, Warren Papers (Yale University).

<sup>17</sup> Owsley to Donald Davidson, August 24, 1932, Davidson Papers (Vanderbilt University); Owsley to Seward Collins, April 12, 1934, in *American Review* Papers (Yale University); Owsley to John Gould Fletcher, March 11, 1935, Owsley Papers. For the popularity of the "matured economy" thesis, during the 1930's, see Robert F. Himmelberg (ed.), *The Great Depression and American Capitalism* (Boston, 1968), *passim*. For the political and social outlook of other "middle-class radicals", see Edward S. Shapiro, "Decentralist Intellectuals and the New Deal," in *Journal of American History*, LVIII (March, 1972), 938-57.

carry its collectivist implications through to their logical conclusion, while he envisaged a frontal attack on economic giantism and dispossession. "I am opposed to Fascism as an ultimate goal," he wrote to Geoffrey Stone, one of America's leading fascist intellectuals of the 1930's, "and unless the situation becomes more desperate, that is unless nothing can be accomplished in the direction of the restoration of property under the 'democratic process', I shall remain opposed to Fascism as an instrument, as a means to an end, in as much as it might become the end in itself." Communism, however, appeared to Owsley to be the more likely result of large-scale industrialism since it merely transferred to the government commissars the political and economic power previously exercised by the capitalists. Communism would also, as the example of the Soviet Union showed, continue and accentuate the dispossession and exploitation of the farmers and small businessmen begun by the industrialists and financiers.<sup>18</sup>

Only a propertied society, Owsley contended, could be democratic since the political and economic independence necessary for democracy could exist only where productive property was widely dispersed. Communism and fascism would have little appeal in a propertied state since the people, being able to care for themselves, had no need for the economic security promised by potential dictators. Furthermore, there was a basic conflict between the economic decentralization of a propertied state and the political collectivism of fascism and communism. By emphasizing that democracy was more than formal governmental procedures and structures and that democracy must have an economic basis, Owsley was exhibiting the tendency of the Progressive historians to discount political rhetoric and instead to focus on the economic and social realities determining political action.<sup>19</sup>

Owsley welcomed the victory of the Democrats in the 1932 election, and was hopeful that Franklin D. Roosevelt recognized the need for aiding farmers and small businessmen in their struggle for survival. Roosevelt, he wrote Donald Davidson in August, 1933, "is a great leader. He aims, I am convinced, to reduce the plutocrats to ranks as far as control of government goes. New York is to be trimmed of its complete financial control, if he has his

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<sup>18</sup> Owsley to Geoffrey Stone, May 24, 1938, Owsley Papers; Owsley, "Scottsboro," 278-79.

<sup>19</sup> Owsley, "The Foundations of Democracy," in *Who Owns America?* edited by Herbert Agar and Allen Tate (Boston, 1936), 67.

way. . . . Roosevelt is conscious that a large part of the population, several millions, will be left unemployed after a normal situation has been restored and that these millions must be put upon the soil. That will be the biggest job he has had." Owsley attributed FDR's triumph to a coalition of the South and West opposed to a continuation of domination by the Northeast, big business, and the Republicans. He eagerly anticipated a concerted and comprehensive New Deal attack upon northern economic interests and the freeing of the South from its status as a colony of northern capitalists. What he particularly wished to see in this regard was a new freight rate schedule for the railroads which would not discriminate against the South, a lowering of the tariffs, an end to monopolies, and a limiting of the powers and prerogatives of large corporations. Without such reforms the South and West, he predicted, would continue to be impoverished and exploited by absentee corporations headquartered in the North.<sup>20</sup>

Owsley could thus agree with left-wing radicals on the need for a vigorous national reform program. He differed from them, however, on the direction this program should take. Whereas they proposed to use Washington to carry out the implications of political and economic centralization to their logical conclusion of complete socialism, he wanted economic and political decentralization to be the thrust of the New Deal. Owsley, in contrast to the leftists, hoped the centralization of power in Washington would only be temporary. Finally, he differed from them regarding the relevance of Marxism to the American situation. Owsley flatly rejected any attempt to analyze the plight of the United States in terms of "class struggle" and the "dictatorship of the proletariat". The exploitation of the South and West by the North rather than the oppression of the working class by the bourgeoisie lay at the heart of the nation's difficulties. The bond resulting from northern workers and capitalists sharing in the benefits of the exploitation of the hinterland, Owsley contended, was far more significant than any ties of class loyalty they might have to their counterparts in the South and West.<sup>21</sup>

This opposition to big business lead Owsley to even contemplate the nationalization of all corporations which could not be broken

<sup>20</sup> Owsley, to Davidson, August 5, 1933, Davidson papers; Owsley, "Scottsboro," 274; Owsley to Marvin M. Lowes, December 11, 1935, in *American Review* Papers; Owsley, "Pellagra Diet," in *Southern Review*, VI (Spring, 1941), 754-55.

<sup>21</sup> Owsley to Allen Tate, November 12, 1935, Tate Papers (Princeton University).

up and which operated in such vital areas as transportation, the extracting of natural resources, and the providing of hydroelectric power. Owsley was especially concerned with the electric power industry since he was a resident of Tennessee and hence familiar with the inequitable manner in which northern-owned utility companies had furnished power to the South. He was thus enthusiastic about the establishment of the Tennessee Valley Authority in 1933, and anticipated that the inexpensive electricity provided by the TVA would make rural life in the Southeast economically more viable and socially more attractive. He also hoped the TVA would destroy the monopoly northern capitalists had over southern sources of power.<sup>22</sup>

Owsley also favored extensive government intervention in agriculture if it would diminish the cancerous increase in farm tenancy and agrarian dispossession which he viewed as the major problem facing the nation, particularly the South, in the 1930's. By 1930 over fifty per cent of southern farmers owned none of the land they farmed. For Owsley the augmenting of the agrarian class was the only permanent solution for the overly industrialized American economy, and the only secure bulwark against communism. Unless the southern black and white tenant farmers were provided land, he warned William E. Dodd, they will provide fertile ground for communist propaganda "and when the trouble breaks we shall have enemies within our own camp and without." Owsley was disappointed that the early New Deal farm legislation had generally ignored the question of absentee-landlordism and tenancy and, instead, had focused on increasing farm income. He would have preferred legislation rehabilitating tenants and sharecroppers into farm owners, forbidding land to be sold to banks, real estate companies, and insurance firms, and offering incentives for subsistence farming. It was not until 1935 that Owsley could rejoice that something was finally going to be done about the "distressingly slow and expensive" progress of rural rehabilitation.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Owsley to Davidson, August 5, 1933, Davidson Papers; Owsley to Geoffrey Stone, May 24, 1938, Owsley Papers; Owsley to William E. Dodd, April 16, 1935, Dodd Papers (Library of Congress); Owsley, "Mr. Daniels Discovers the South," in *Southern Review*, IV (Spring, 1939), 670; Edward S. Shapiro, "The Southern Agrarians and the TVA," in *American Quarterly*, XXII (Winter, 1970), 791-806.

<sup>23</sup> Owsley to Dodd, April 16, 1935, Dodd Papers; Owsley to Lowes, March 11, 1935, in *American Review* Papers; Owsley, "Pellagra Diet," 752-53; Troy J. Cauley to Owsley, December 27, 1935, Owsley Papers. Owsley to Allen Tate, November 12, 1935, Tate Papers. Owsley's "The Pillars of Agrarianism," in *American Review*,

In that year Senator John H. Bankhead of Alabama introduced a bill providing long-term loans at low interest to sharecroppers and farm tenants to enable them to become farm owners. Bankhead's bill would establish a government corporation known as the Farmers' Home Corporation with power to loan up to one billion dollars per year to tenants and sharecroppers for the purchase of homes, land, supplies, and equipment. Bankhead argued that his proposal would increase subsistence farming, reduce relief payments, and enable some of the urban employed to return to the land. This was precisely the type of legislation Owsley wanted. The Bankhead bill, Owsley maintained, would increase the number of economically independent Americans, would decrease dependence on the government, and would lessen the appeal of radicals among the rural and urban dispossessed. He believed the Bankhead plan to be the most important measure to come forth during Roosevelt's first term since it was the most direct attempt to encourage the wider distribution of property. "We should all get behind that bill," he wrote to another advocate of a middle-class revolution, "it is the best . . . proposition thus far proposed by any official. . . . Most of the other Roosevelt legislation has dealt with the distribution of income; this is the distribution of capital."<sup>24</sup>

Owsley voted for Roosevelt in 1936, the last time he voted for the national Democratic ticket. Owsley's initial disaffection resulted from his fear that the unprecedented centralization of political power during the 1930's had not been accompanied either by a meaningful attack on plutocracy or by a serious attempt to create a propertied society. He blamed this on the fact that the New Dealers were too enamoured of political and economic centralization. "Regulating the hours of production, the hours of labor, fixing minimum wages and minimum prices and all the other strong measures provided for in the recovery legislation," Owsley declared, "are mere palliatives, mere treatment of symptoms when looked at from the long view. The cause of the disease is left intact." Owsley even concluded that the long-range effect of the

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IV (March, 1935), 529-47, is the fullest statement of Owsley's social and political thought. Senators Hugo L. Black and John H. Bankhead of Alabama and William E. Dodd praised its emphasis on political decentralization and a return to yeoman agriculture. Black to Owsley, March 16, 1935; Dodd to Owsley, March 26, 1935 and May 4, 1935; Bankhead to Owsley, March 15, 1935, Owsley Papers.

<sup>24</sup> Bankhead to Owsley, March 15, 1935, Owsley Papers; Owsley to Lowes, March 16, 1935, in *American Review* Papers; Owsley to John Gould Fletcher, March 11 and March 16, 1935, Owsley Papers.

New Deal had been to increase industrialization in the South as well as absentee industrial and financial landlordism. A key to Owsley's thinking is found in one of his essays where he denied that Jefferson had believed in laissez-faire. Jefferson, Owsley wrote, "found a tremendous amount of government intervention necessary, even in an agricultural society, to prevent men from injuring one another." He "was unafraid of government except when it was in the hands of the enemies of free government." From the late 1930's until his death in 1956 Owsley believed the federal government had fallen into the hands of "the enemies of free government."<sup>26</sup>

The most important factor in Owsley's new view of the federal government was his dread that the power of Washington was going to be used to interfere in the most delicate and sensitive of all southern concerns, relations between the races. The expansion of federal power had already posed a potential threat to the sanctity of southern racial patterns, but it was a tolerable threat as long as Owsley was convinced that the New Deal recognized the necessity for a fundamental redistribution of productive property.

Owsley always accepted the dominant southern attitude regarding the racial question. His description of the southern black as "guileless" reflected the traditional southern image of the Negro as juvenile and irresponsible. For him segregation was a fundamental aspect of southern life and he would not accept any northern tampering with it. The South, he claimed, hadn't been responsible for slavery since the institution had been introduced into the South by yankee merchants. "Let the blood of slavery rest upon the heads of those who had forced it upon the South." Even so, southern race relations would have been harmonious and beneficial both for whites and blacks had it not been for continual northern interference. During the antebellum period,

The slave possessed a great sense of security. He was cared for until he was old enough to work, well cared for; and when he became too old or ill to work the master and mistress fed, clothed, housed, and nursed him until death, whereupon he was given a Christian burial in the family cemetery, and quite frequently . . . he

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<sup>26</sup> Herman C. Nixon to Owsley, October 25, 1935, Owsley Papers; Owsley, "Man or Machine?" (unpublished mss., in *American Review* Papers, 1933), 10-11; Owsley, "The Foundations of Democracy," 62-64; Owsley, "Fear May Come too Late," in *Sewanee Review*, LV (Summer, 1947), 514-17.



had a marble slab with affectionate sentiment inscribed upon it placed at the head of his grave.

The consolidation of black political power within the Democratic Party, the support for civil rights legislation voiced by some New Dealers, most notably Eleanor Roosevelt, and the disruptive effect of some of the New Deal legislation on southern racial patterns lead Owsley, as well as many other Southerners, to question the intentions of the Roosevelt administration towards the South.<sup>86</sup>

This change in attitude regarding the New Deal is readily seen in Owsley's response to Roosevelt's 1937 proposal to "pack" the Supreme Court. Owsley had previously accepted the Beardian view of the Constitution and the Supreme Court as tools of northern economic interests. In 1936 he described the court as a "judicial despotism" which exhibited "excessive amiability toward those who possess great wealth and great indifference toward those who own nothing or small private properties." Owsley wrote differently after Roosevelt's attack on the court. He then accused the New Deal of overstepping constitutional boundaries. Under Roosevelt the presidency, "by the use of patronage, relief funds, manipulation of national credit, and other similar methods, has gained ascendancy over the legislative branch of the national government and for the time being over the Supreme Court." The national administration, Owsley charged in 1940, has "destroyed the sovereignty of the people of the United States and made itself sovereign."<sup>87</sup>

Beginning in the late 1930's Owsley also became deeply disturbed by the growth of the labor movement. He did not in principle op-

<sup>86</sup> Owsley, "Scottsboro," 261-72; Owsley, "Irrepressible Conflict," 78; Owsley, "The Old South and the New," in *American Review*, VI (February, 1936), 478-79; Owsley, "The Fundamental Cause of the Civil War: Egocentric Sectionalism," in *Journal of Southern History*, VII (February, 1941), 7-9, 16-18. The most complete analysis of the relationship between the New Deal and the South is Frank B. Friedel, *F.D.R. and the South* (Baton Rouge, 1965).

<sup>87</sup> Owsley, "The Foundations of Democracy," 57-58; Owsley, Review of *The Social Philosophy of John Taylor of Caroline*, by E. T. Hodge, in *Free America*, IV (February, 1940), 19. For the opposition of Southerners to the court-packing plan because of its threat to white supremacy, see Monroe Lee Billington, *The Political South in the Twentieth Century* (New York, 1975), 78-79. Owsley came to believe that, as far as the race issue was concerned, the Democratic Party had been in the same position as the Republican Party was during Reconstruction. Thomas B. Alexander to Owsley, October 17, 1944, Owsley Papers. See also Owsley, "The Agrarians Today," in *Shenandoah*, III (Summer, 1952), 24-25. "The New Deal, of course, went far—and continues—in breaking down the Federal principle in our government. . . . A unitary form of government is rapidly replacing the Federal, which, of course, has the effect of placing the social and economic life of the American people under the national government."

pose unions but he did believe they had become far too powerful and had acquired too much political influence. "I have always been *liberal* in my social views," Owsley wrote Allen Tate in 1943. "Not any more, however. Behold in me, sir, not even a *Conservative* but a *reactionary*. On race and on the 'dictatorship of the proletariat' I stand where my friend John C. Calhoun stood one hundred years ago. If I must choose between 'big business' and 'big labor'—a choice I'd always hoped never to be compelled to make—I must choose big business. . . . God help this country, for it is losing at home what the soldiers are being sent abroad to fight for: *the sovereignty of the people as against the sovereignty of government*." Nothing less than the fate of constitutional democracy and "the freedom, integrity and self respect of the Southern white people" were threatened.<sup>28</sup>

Thus by the end of World War II Owsley was more concerned with the growth of big government and the menace this posed to southern racial patterns than with disciplining big business and high finance. Owsley's defense of the white South's position on race was less a matter of white supremacy and more a matter of protecting the integrity of southern culture and the continuity of southern life from external attack. His racial attitudes must be seen within the context of his lifelong struggle in behalf of regionalism. Indeed, Owsley approved of the amelioration of the condition of southern Negroes just as long as it was due to indigenous forces within the South rather than to pressures from the North. Except for the right to vote, Owsley told Tate, "I am willing and anxious to see the negro enjoy equality before the law, equal economic opportunities, equal cultural opportunities—in short *separate but equal opportunities* in all matters. . . ." He was certain that most white Southerners felt as he did and that, if left alone, they would insist on alleviating racial tensions. "But they will never be left alone, and men with the conservative race point of view should take the lead away from the Radicals by coming out in the open. . . . We must make it clear what we will *not do*, or

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<sup>28</sup>Owsley to Tate, November 14, 1943, and August 13, 1944, Owsley Papers. Owsley's bleakest analysis of the state of American politics is in his posthumously published essay, "Democracy Unlimited," in *Georgia Review*, XV (Summer, 1961), 129-43. For a similar move to the right by another of the Southern Agrarians, see Edward S. Shapiro, "Donald Davidson and the Tennessee Valley Authority: The Response of a Southern Conservative," in *Tennessee Historical Quarterly*, XXXIII (Winter, 1974), 436-51.

*permit to be done*; then we should state positively and clearly what we *will do*.<sup>29</sup>

Reflecting the cold-war mentality of the immediate post-World War II era, Owsley attributed much of the agitation over southern segregation to a communist conspiracy directed from Moscow to create "well-planned and highly effective campaigns of disruption in the South." The goals of the Kremlin were to breed tension and distrust between economic, racial, and geographic groups, to encourage disorder and violence, to prevent a strong American foreign policy by weakening national unity, and to foster a situation conducive for "an organized and armed minority to take over and open the gates to Russian invasion."<sup>30</sup>

Owsley's worst fears were realized in 1954 when the Supreme Court declared school segregation unconstitutional. He not only questioned the reasoning of the Court and denied that its decision was in any way sacrosanct, but also claimed that most Southerners, black and white, preferred segregated schools, that school integration would prevent each race from developing its potentialities to the fullest, and that segregated schools were the only means to preserve harmony between the races and to prevent social mixing between the races. The South must, he believed, use all legal means to get the Brown decision reversed. The court's ruling, Owsley wrote to a fellow segregationist, "is a mighty stride toward the monolithic state that our Yankee liberals are creating. . . . What a great boon this Supreme Court decision is to the Communists, who are in the NAACP up to their eye-balls." One wonders what Owsley would have thought of the 1974-75 University of Alabama basketball team which started five blacks. Not only did the university's band substitute the theme from "Shaft" for "Dixie" in its pre-game show, but the predominately white student body cheered the team on with the cry, "Ungawa, Bama's got soul power."<sup>31</sup>

<sup>29</sup> Owsley to Tate, December 7, 1943, and July 23, 1945, Tate Papers; Owsley, "A House Divided," in *Sewanee Review*, LIII (July-September, 1945), 503.

<sup>30</sup> Owsley, "The Chief Stakes of the South in World Affairs Today," (unpublished mss., Owsley Papers, undated, circa, 1950), 9-17; Owsley, "How Communism Wins the Support of the Masses," (unpublished mss., Owsley Papers, undated), 2ff.

<sup>31</sup> Owsley, "Whither the Citizens Councils?" in *Tuscaloosa (Ala.) News*, March 21, 1954; Owsley to Andrew Nelson Lytle, February 28, 1956, Lytle Papers (Tennessee State Library and Archives); Peter Bonventre, "How Alabama Got Soul," in *Newsweek*, LXXXV (March 10, 1975), 69. Owsley, accepted, although he did not welcome, the admission of Negroes to southern graduate and professional schools since there were not many southern blacks pursuing postgraduate work and since it was better for them to be educated in the South than in the North. Owsley to Lytle, *op. cit.*

The ideological metamorphosis of Owsley from the middle-class radicalism of the 1930's to the conservatism of the 1940's and 1950's was typical of the change in many Southerners. His career shows that for some Southerners the essence of southern identity lay neither in the region's conservatism nor in its agrarianism nor in its liberalism. The South was a "conscious minority" prior to the Civil War and remained one after the war ended, and its identity was to be found in a militant defense of whatever southern interest was currently under northern attack. The Southerner was, above all else, pro-South and among all the southern institutions he wished to defend, the most important was white supremacy. With the resistance of the white South to school integration just about destroyed, with white southern football coaches busily combing the ghettos for future all-American linebackers, and with a portrait of Martin Luther King hanging in the Georgia state capitol, will the South continue to be southern, or, at least, will it continue to be southern in the way Frank L. Owsley believed the South to be?<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> Smiley, "Quest for the Central Theme," 322-23. For a different interpretation of Owsley, see M. E. Bradford, "What We Can Know for Certain: Frank Owsley and the Recovery of Southern History," in *Sewanee Review*, LXXXVIII (October-December, 1970), 667. "On first impression there is a contradiction of thrust or emphasis between Dr. Owsley's warm consideration of temporary federal or state measures for the relief of regional and national economic distress (c. 1930-1936) and his subsequent warnings against government (c. 1955, in the shadow of the Brown decision)," Professor Bradford writes, "However, the trouble is not so much with Owsley as in the rigid and passionate insufficiency of the political idiom to which we are accustomed. From its beginnings the South has spoken with two voices, which voice depending upon the variety and source of the pressure it experienced from without. The English Whig tradition of earned Saxon rights and its preoccupation with individual self-realization through liberty and law provided a language for dealing with George III, Federalist mercantilism, and subsequent 'colonialist' incursions. But the South has also made its Tory noises: in defense of 'peculiar' institutions—spiritual, moral, social, and economic. In truth, the region's political inheritance is a compounding of these two English strains: a syncretism of worked-out equipoise of the best elements from both doctrines, a synthesis doubled in the 'tidewater and frontier' fusion of its literature."